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Sermons of James Freeman Clarke

UNITAIRIAN BELIEF

VI. The Unitarian Belief in Regard to Vicarious Sacrifice as the Central Idea in Christianity.

BOSTON
GEORGE H. ELLIS, 272 CONGRESS STREET
1900

Sermons by James Freeman Clarke.

The Five Points of Calvinism and the Five Points of the New Theology.

The Sin against the Holy Ghost.

The Introduction to the Gospel of John.

Christ and his Antichrists.

Old and New Ideas concerning the Divinity of Jesus.

Is Probation or Education the End of Life?

The Sabbath — Sunday — or the Lord's Day — which?

Old and New Views concerning the Bible.

The True Coming of Christ.

Agnosticism *versus* Positivism.

The Hercules and Wagoner of To-day; or, State Help *versus* Self-help.

Discussions concerning Conscience and its Development.

The Scientific Basis of Prayer.

The Meaning and Value of the Lord's Supper at this Time.

Some Reasons for Believing in a Future Life.

The Mutual Obligations of Science and Religion.

From Faith to Faith.

A Happy New Year.

The Ministry of the Letter and the Ministry of the Spirit.

A Sermon on Scolding.

Melchizedek and his Moral.

"The Wrath of the Lamb."

Rejoice Evermore.

Dorothea L. Dix.

Anarchy and Law.

Temperance Efforts and Temperance Methods.

The Pew System and the Free-seat System.

What God gives He gives forever.

The Broad Church.

Christ and Other Masters.

The Old and New View of the Hereafter.

Lost Opportunities.

Be not Weary in Well-doing.

Homes in Heaven and on Earth.

The Joys of Christmas.

How to get the Most out of the Coming Year.

"I make All Things New."

Man doth not live by Bread alone.

Religion made for Man, not Man for Religion.

What do Unitarians believe about God?

What do Unitarians believe about Jesus Christ?

What do Unitarians believe about Sin and Salvation?

Unitarian Belief in regard to the Supernatural Element in Christianity.

Unitarian Belief in regard to Vicarious Sacrifice as the Central Idea in Christianity.

What do Unitarians believe about Heaven and Hell?

What do Unitarians believe about the Holy Ghost?

Divine Providence and Human Freedom.

Conversion and Regeneration.

The True Doctrine of Liberal Christianity.

The Brotherhood of Man.

The Crusade against the Chinese.

The Mind of Christ.

The Gospel in the Gospels.

Ethics of the Sermon on the Mount.

Sermon on the Mount. How Jesus fulfils Law.

Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes.

The Central Idea of the Sermon on the Mount.

Sermon on the Mount. Three Degrees of Hatred,— Anger, Defamation, Contempt.

Sermon on the Mount. The Sin of Anxiety.

Sermon on the Mount. Saying and Doing.

The House on the Rock and the House on the Sand

How the Insight of Jesus led to Foresight.

What did Jesus himself teach concerning Probation and the Condition of the Heathen?

"Souls already risen with Christ."

Communities Above.

The Genuine Prayer.

Why should we go to Church?

Any one who wishes for reading of this kind is invited to write to Miss L. Freeman Clarke, 91 Mt. Vernon Street, Boston, Mass.

The Unitarian Belief in Regard to Vicarious Sacrifice as the Central Idea in Christianity.

"For Christ hath also once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God."— 1 PETER iii. 18.

I intend in this sermon to state some points of the Unitarian belief in regard to the vicarious sacrifice of Christ.

We all know the great stress laid by the Christian Church on this doctrine of vicarious sacrifice. By many it is regarded as the very centre and essence of the Christian system. Faith in the atoning death of Christ, or what is sometimes called his expiatory sacrifice, is often held to be the one condition of salvation. And even the figurative phrases of the New Testament, where the "blood" of Christ is spoken of, are frequently taken literally. We hear preachers talking about "salvation by blood" until the spirit of Christ and his self-sacrificing love seem lost sight of in a mere materialism.

There certainly is much said in the New Testament of the death of Christ as saving us from our sins, and even the blood of Jesus is frequently spoken of. Jesus himself says, "This is my blood of the new covenant, which was shed for you and for many, for the forgiveness of sins." Other texts speak of Christ's having made peace through the blood of the cross: "entering into the

holiest by the blood of Jesus"; "the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin"; "thou hast redeemed us to God by thy blood"; "we, who were afar off, are made nigh by the blood of Christ."

But because the apostles spoke so often of the "blood of Christ" it does not follow that we should use this phrase. Consider this,— that down to the time when Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire the worship of nearly all mankind was one of animal sacrifices. The public prayers of all religions, Buddhism alone excepted, were sacrifices. No religious ceremonies took place without the offering up of animal life on the altars of the temples. These altars ran with blood. All sin must be expiated by such offerings. No one supposed he could be forgiven except by the blood of victims slain to appease the anger of some offended deity. Just as men brought a present to pacify the anger of a king, they brought their presents to placate an indignant God. In the Jewish religion this took place only in the temple: all sacrifices must be offered there. From morning till evening, on every day through the year, sacrifices were brought to the great altar before the holy place. These sacrifices were so associated with the ideas of divine pardon and divine help that a religion without sacrifices seemed hardly any religion at all. Hence it was the most natural thing for the apostles to say, "Christ is our sacrifice," "He is our victim," "We have pardon through his blood," "He is our passover."

One of the striking things about Christianity is that it put an entire end to the whole worship of sacrifices, so that the notion has become as foreign to our mind as it was natural to the mind of the apostles. We have been

lifted by Christ above that whole region of thought and language. Why, then, should we return to it again? That which was sincere to the apostles has become insincere to us. Jesus has brought us a religion of the spirit: why go back to one of the letter? Even the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, who tells us how the death of Christ is the great sacrifice, teaches that the essence of all sacrifices is generous love, which devotes itself for the good of others. "To do good and to communicate forget not, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased."

The chief idea concerning God in the Old Testament was that he was a king, the highest of all kings, King of kings and Lord of lords. The homage offered to him was like that offered to earthly chiefs and human monarchs. If the monarch was angry, he was appeased by presents. If men asked of him a favor, they brought a gift in their hand. If he had conferred a benefit, their gratitude showed itself in another gift. So, in the worship of the gods, there were sin-offerings, thank-offerings, and offerings of supplications. It was supposed that the gods, like men, would be pleased with presents. As the wealth, in early states of civilization, consists chiefly in flocks and herds, these were the presents offered to the gods. But as the gods were invisible, and could not receive these gifts in person, they were offered to them through the priests, in the form of burnt offerings. The smoke of the victims ascended through the air, and was supposed to reach the Deity.

Christianity put an end to this whole system of sacrifices by substituting a new conception of the character of God in place of the old one. Instead of King, he was now

Father. Instead of wishing for gifts from his children, he is the All-giver. Instead of desiring sacrifice, he asks us to do good to each other. The modern form of sacrifice, introduced by Jesus, is not giving up what we value to please God, but giving it up to help his children. Humanity is sacrifice, philanthropy is sacrifice. "To do good and to communicate forget not, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased."

And now we see why such stress is laid in Scripture on the death of Christ. It introduced a new idea of God. His death was not an offering made by sinful man to appease the anger of God, but a blessing sent from God for the good of sinful man. It is not manifestation of divine wrath, but of divine love. "God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that all who believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." The old idea of sacrifice is here reversed. Instead of man presenting an offering to God, it is God who gives Christ to die for man. It is the power of divine love in Jesus which leads him to die. He does not die to bring God to us, but to bring us to God. "He died for us, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God." This is the tenor of the New Testament. "We are reconciled to God by the death of his Son." It does not say God is reconciled to us by Jesus Christ, but "God has reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ." "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself." "It pleased the Father, having made peace by the blood of the cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself." As Jesus lived and died in

order to lead men to love God, and as, in doing this, he was doing the work God gave him to do, the Scriptures consider his death an act of divine love to the world. Man does not make this sacrifice to please God. God makes the sacrifice to help men. He gives his dear Son. He sends the purest and noblest of his children to die, in order to save from evil and misery the lowest and the worst.

Here, then, is a radical change in the whole idea of sacrifices. It is not we who give them to God: he gives them to us. Naturally and inevitably, the vast system of worship based on the old idea must now disappear. From this time forward, wherever the new gospel went, it put an end to the old priesthood, altar and sacrifices. These words are henceforth mere figurative phrases when used in Christendom.

Even before the coming of Christ this was seen, whenever God was seen to be a God of love. "To what purpose the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the Lord: I am weary to bear them." "Thou desirest not sacrifice, else would I give it; thou delightest not in burnt offerings." "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O Lord, thou wilt not despise."

The power of the death of Jesus consists in its being the manifestation of this fact. It was not merely the death of a martyr, giving his life in attestation to the truth. It was a new revelation of the character of God, just as the whole life of Jesus was a revelation of that character. God is revealed in a thousand ways, but his best revelation is in a soul at one with him. Jesus lived and died to bring all souls to God; to take away every-

thing which keeps men apart from their Father; to remove doubt, anxiety, fear; to put an end to the notion that God can only be approached by priests, only appeased by sacrifices, only worshipped in temples, only served at altars. He came to make all men sons of God; to break down every partition which kept them from their Father. And in this he was a revelation of the divine love to every human soul. Thus the death of Jesus was not only a human, but also a divine act. It was a manifestation not only of his own, but also of the Father who sent him. He gave his life a ransom for many; and, in doing so, he made known the love of God to every sinful child.

Thus by the death of Jesus a great hope was born in human hearts, which was an inspiration to all generous endeavor. Those who were afar off were made nigh. The day had come when all could know the Lord, from the least to the greatest.

But old beliefs are tenacious of life. They come back in new forms. The belief that the sinner must do something to appease God's anger revived again. It now took this shape: that, though the sinner himself could not do anything to appease God, Christ must do it for him. Therefore, it was taught that Christ by his death had satisfied the divine justice, or pacified God's wrath, or paid our debt, or been punished in our place; and this was called the vicarious sacrifice. It was supposed that the attribute of justice in God must be satisfied, and the debt due from sinners be paid, before the attribute of mercy could act. It was also argued that the justice of God required that Christ should be punished in the place of all mankind, and that he was so punished. But these views are not only opposed to reason and conscience, but

also to the direct teachings of the Bible. Vicarious punishment is a contradiction in terms. An innocent person may suffer for another, but he cannot be punished for another. The prophet Ezekiel teaches this in express terms: "The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the iniquity of the wicked shall be upon him. But if the wicked man turn from the wickedness he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive." So plainly does the Scripture teach that there can be no such thing as vicarious punishment. In fact, the doctrine of the vicarious punishment of Christ is opposed both to the justice and the mercy of God. What justice can there be in punishing the innocent in place of the guilty, and what mercy can there be in pardoning sin after it has been punished, or forgiving a debt after it has been paid?

But, though the doctrine of the vicarious punishment of Christ is incredible and impossible, that of his vicarious suffering is eminently true and most important. Christ's death illustrated a universal law. It teaches us that the world cannot be saved from its evils or made better except so far as the good are willing to give their time, labor, and sympathy for the bad, the happy for the wretched. This is the great principle of Christian salvation and human progress.

This doctrine, however, is not universally received by modern thinkers. An opposite view is strongly maintained by many, who believe that human progress consists in saving the strong and letting the weak die. They argue that this is the real law of human progress. It is

the survival of the fittest in the struggle for existence. According to this view, true philanthropy does not consist in strengthening the weak, supporting the feeble, trying to reform the criminal, building hospitals for the sick, asylums for the insane, schools for the feeble-minded, or founding institutions for the blind, the deaf and the dumb, the orphans. This is all a waste of power. The true plan, say they, is to make the strong stronger, the good better, the wise more intelligent, and to allow the feeble and weak to die out and disappear. Those who hold this view ought logically to add that it would be better, instead of trying to reform the vicious and the criminal classes, to put them to death. To be consistent, they should restore the mediæval laws, which made capital punishment the penalty for almost every crime.

These are two views of human progress, distinctly opposed to each other, one claiming to be Christian, the other more scientific and philosophical. If one is true, the other is false. They cannot both be true. If, then, we believe that modern society is pursuing the right path in building hospitals and asylums, reformatories and schools, let us see what reason we have for this faith.

The theory of the formation of species, as formulated by Charles Darwin, must not be held responsible for this inference from it in regard to man. Mr. Darwin was too careful and too conscientious a thinker to carry his hypothesis further than the facts seemed to warrant. Many of his followers have not been as wise. The doctrine of the survival of the fittest in the struggle for existence may be true as regards the lower orders of creation, and not applicable to human society. Here other most important elements come in play. The question as to who

are the fittest to survive among human beings is not one of mere physical power, but also of moral and intellectual qualities. Walter Scott was a sickly and pining child, from a physical point of view hardly worth raising. Other men of great influence have been invalids from their childhood. No doubt there is a struggle for existence in human society, a stern competition in all human occupations. But this alone would not produce progress, but disintegration, degradation, and relapse. Let the selfish principle work by itself, unchecked by conscience, affection, social sympathy, friendship, loyalty to leaders, humanity, and self-sacrifice, and there would be no human society at all, but only a mass of atoms. All laws would cease, all order come to an end, and a condition of universal warfare be the result. But where man is to be found, he is found in society; and wherever society exists there is mutual dependence. In the lowest savage condition, it is still true that "no man liveth to himself." Some kind of family life exists, some sort of social organization, some sense of duty to others, some need which each man has of the help of his neighbor. And, as society advances, these relations become more complicated and interwoven. A community like ours resembles an organized body, in which each organ is necessary for the healthful working of the system, and where, "if one member suffers, all suffer with it." How plain it is that we cannot leave any portion of this community to itself! Each part must take care of every other part, or all are in danger. The foot cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of thee." Labor needs capital, capital needs labor, and they must learn to co-operate, or both will be paralyzed. The safety and peace of society require that the wise shall look after the

foolish, the educated provide instruction for the ignorant, the prosperous and comfortable help the poor and feeble to better homes, more healthful surroundings. If we do not do this for their sake, we must do it for our own. Allow disease and crime to take possession of the poorest district in our city, and their contagion will reach the highest. In saving others from miseries, we save ourselves and children. For this reason, if for no other, we must provide free schools, free churches, a ministry at large, dispensaries, reform schools, and asylums. No one is perfectly safe while any one is in danger.

The principle of competition must therefore be balanced by that of mutual help: the selfish struggle of each individual for personal advantage must be supplemented by taking an interest in others. It is not enough to pass laws to protect society, and to pay a police to enforce such laws, to maintain courts and prisons, a State and a city government. How are these laws to be enforced? Who shall guard the guards? Laws will only be executed when public opinion requires it,— the public opinion that all men are interested in what happens to all other men.

And, now, how is this public spirit to be created? How are men to be made to care for others as well as for themselves? How is the selfish struggle for personal success to be balanced by a generous interest in the welfare of others? It is here that the gospel of Christ comes in with power to save society from relapse and ruin, to balance with social sympathy, humanity, brotherly love, the immense energy directed to the accumulation of wealth, power, and luxury. So long as Christianity supplies these great motives, modern society is safe; but, let them

die out and come to an end, and modern civilization will follow that of ancient time into ruin.

I do not mean to say that Christianity has invented the great virtues of patriotism, philanthropy, and humanity. In all ages there have been noble souls, the salt of the earth, who have given their lives to helping their fellow-men. God has sent prophets and reformers, saints and martyrs, to every race, every age, and every continent. These are the men who have kept society from stagnation and decay. How poor life would have been without the great cloud of witnesses who have testified in all times that there is something more in men than a selfish struggle for personal ends! The words and actions of the great reformers, teachers, patriots, have stirred the human soul, and carried the world onward. We feel better for their virtue: life seems worth living because such souls have lived.

Christianity did not invent these generosities; but Christianity has given us a principle by which they have entered into all parts of human life,—a principle which alone can balance that of selfish competition. This is the principle which Jesus has sanctified by his cross,—the principle of self-sacrifice for others as the true service of God. Jesus has taught that all men are the children of one Father; that all are dear to him; that all are brethren, members of one family. He has taught us that God loves all; that in the lowest and meanest there is a spark of divine fire, capable of being kindled into a flame. He has taught us to look below the surface and seek the substance; below the habits of evil, to find the eternal, undying, unconquerable love of goodness. He has shown us that God loves us, though we have sinned so much and

so often; that God hopes for us, when we do not dare to hope for ourselves; that he forgives us, not seven times only, but seventy times seven; and that, therefore, we must be willing to forgive and help our sinful brother. "Be ye children of your Father in heaven, who lets his sun shine on the evil and the good, and sends his rain on the just and the unjust." "Be ye kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ has forgiven you." Christ himself has been the great example of this love, which comes to seek and save that which is lost, which leaves the ninety-and-nine sheep which have not gone astray, and goes to seek the one lost sheep till he find it. He has come, not to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance. His life, no less than his death, manifested the great power of vicarious suffering,—suffering for others. This great principle has been the salvation of society. It does not mean the survival of the fittest, but the salvation of those who seem the most unfit. It shows us that those members of the social body which seem to be the most feeble are still necessary to the general good, and that

> "All are needed by each one,
> Nothing is fair or good alone";

and that, if one suffer, all must suffer. Since Christ came, this principle has been a leaven, penetrating society. It is the power of a generous self-sacrifice, which says, "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ." It tells us that

> "True freedom is to share
> All the chains our brothers wear,
> And with heart and soul to be
> Earnest to make others free."

This is the great power which is to save and improve society. Call it what you will,—the law of vicarious suffering or the power of Christian love,—its root is in the sight of the Father's universal love, its power is in the spirit which calls God Father, its end is the universal brotherhood of man with man, and a progress, not merely by a selfish and lonely struggle, but by mutual aid and a boundless charity for all the children of God.